

News From the Legislature

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48th
Legislative
District



Keeping in touch

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2004 Session Report

Spring 2004

Thank you for graciously allowing me to serve you as your state representative for the last two years. It has been very educational, and I feel like I made some progress in key areas.

I signed up for this job with a handful of goals, some long-term and some more immediate. The topic that motivated me to run for this seat is the tremendous educational need faced by the state. My other big concern is the economy. In order to get back on a sound footing we need to make sure we are doing everything we can to improve job creation and retention, particularly jobs that are likely to stay here and pay enough to have benefits and healthcare.

These two concerns are related. Microsoft has thousands of open jobs, but cannot find enough qualified college graduates here in Washington. This problem is a serious drag on our economy, and contributes to our unemployment problem.

We made progress on short-term school funding. My bill allowing school districts to collect the full value of levies passed by their voters was signed by the governor and we helped our teachers by putting back what we cut from their healthcare payments last year. In the long-term we started a project to completely review the whole school funding program. I am vice-chair of this effort.

The need for transportation investment in the Puget Sound area is overwhelming. Last year we passed the first major increase in transportation spending in a dozen years. This year we improved it, but we still have a tremendous amount of work to do in providing a balanced transportation plan for the entire region, and dealing with the crumbling infrastructure of the 520 bridge and the Viaduct.

As I researched state government I developed a concern about how budgets were developed and our ability as citizens to ask probing questions about how the money is spent. My first two years in the legislature have amplified this concern. Last year we balanced the budget without new taxes despite a \$2.7 billion shortfall. This year we are finally seeing some small signs of progress in the economy. We balanced the budget again, with incremental improvements in some areas particularly hurt in last year's cuts, most notably healthcare for poor children and providing additional higher education "slots" to make sure our growing population can attend college here in Washington.

The remainder of this newsletter details some of these areas and explores others. If you are interested in more detail on anything you read here, or have other concerns, please send email or call. My contact information is at left.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ross Hunter".

EDUCATION:

Our paramount duty in state government

My priority in Olympia is education reform and we got a lot accomplished for a quick 60-day session. A four-bill package we passed fixes our state's assessment standards, improves funding for low-income schools, gives local school districts the full value of voter-approved levies, and creates a very limited public charter school system.

Making the WASL fairer for kids

The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) is a test required for graduation in Washington. We made the test fairer by allowing students to retake sections they fail the first time. We want to make sure they know the material, not that they had a bad test day. Many other elements of this bill continue our commitment to making sure that ALL students graduate with skills they can use in the workplace.

Helping kids meet the standards

The Learning Assistance Program (LAP), a major education funding program, helps underachieving students in kindergarten through ninth grade who need additional assistance in reading, mathematics, writing, or the readiness skills associated with those subjects. The bill updated LAP to use the most current research on program effectiveness and changed the funding formula to make the distribution of money more stable and more focused on the kids who need it most.



Funding for local levies

My bill to give the full value of voter-approved levies to local school districts was signed by Governor Locke in Bellevue last month. It provides several million dollars local voters have already approved for the students in the 48th district. This is the first major piece of legislation I moved through the legislature and I am very proud of it.

Looking at future education reforms

Unfortunately a couple of key education bills passed by the House didn't survive the Senate.

We should have sent voters a choice to provide for a **simple majority**, 50 percent plus one vote, to authorize a local school levy. Since this change requires an amendment to the state Constitution, you would have to vote on it. The antiquated law that school levies need a 60 percent supermajority to pass hurts students in districts that have difficulty passing levies.

A complete understanding of the public school financing system will help us intelligently reform the system, so we can meet our Constitutional duty to "make ample provision for the education of all children." A bill of mine would have created a joint task force on K-12 finance to re-design our funding system to be fair to students, teachers, and taxpayers. The House is taking action, and I am now vice-chair of a joint subcommittee of the Appropriations and Education committees that will start this effort.

2004 SUPPLEMENTAL BUDGET

Reasonable, fiscally responsible investments

We passed a bipartisan, carefully-crafted adjustment to the biennial budget this session. This budget restored some of the deep cuts to the health safety net, invested in higher education and funded environmental programs – with no new taxes and \$275 million in reserve.

By 2008, over 30,000 more high school graduates will be knocking on the doors of the colleges and universities in our state. The 2004 supplemental budget increases enrollment in our state colleges by 3,000 students, many in high demand fields like engineering, bio-tech, and nursing. This isn't enough, but it is progress.

Thanks to another \$1.6 million investment, the University of Washington can recruit biosciences researchers to establish a Proteomics Center, which will combine the skills of biologists, computer scientists and biochemists to identify the unique composition of specific proteins to help predict and manage diseases.

The budget we passed restores some of the serious cuts to the safety net made last year to bridge the \$6 billion shortfall. We eliminated Medicaid premiums for children from families with incomes of up to 150% of poverty (\$23,000 a year for a family of three). Children without health care coverage are more likely to miss school and to be hospitalized for preventable illnesses, so this money will help our most vulnerable citizens and save money in the long run.

Creating good jobs and making our state business-friendly

Our state needs to be more competitive. To boost high-wage jobs, we renewed existing incentives for companies creating infrastructure and actively doing research and development in Washington. This bill makes our tax structure competitive with the states we compete with for bio-tech and other high-tech businesses. Accountability standards built into the law help

determine if the incentives create jobs and products, without compromising confidential information from the companies.

For example, Pathway Medical Technologies is developing a catheter for treating victims of heart attacks and other severe coronary vascular problems. The five-year-old company, based in Redmond with less than 50 employees, is still working on its product. For companies like these, the tax credits do make a difference.

Health care for small businesses

Part of the reason small businesses will tell you they cannot afford health care is because state law mandates that all health plans must contain an extensive list of therapies and treatments. These requirements add greatly to the cost and can put insurance out of reach for some. We introduced slimmed-down plans at less expensive prices while maintaining proper safeguards, through a bill that gives new options to insurance providers and consumers.

TRANSPORTATION

Keeping the state moving

Our supplemental transportation budget fixed a \$32 million hole as a result of initiative 776. We had to scramble to keep all the existing projects on track. I'm happy to report that we were able to do this, and keep projects like SR 202 in Redmond moving forward.

The bigger effort that I hope we will see this fall is the Regional Transportation improvement district referendum. I hope the RTID board will be able to produce a plan that all the stakeholders will be able to campaign for. If we do nothing we will be stuck in a descending spiral of



Rep. Hunter at the signing of the R&D tax incentive bill on Feb. 19

increasing traffic, decreasing ability to move goods and services, and a declining quality of life.

I am particularly concerned about the 520 bridge and the Viaduct. If you watched TV coverage of the Northridge quake in California you know what can happen to a stacked highway. I don't want that to happen to the Viaduct on my watch, nor do I want the 520 bridge to sink in a large windstorm.

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

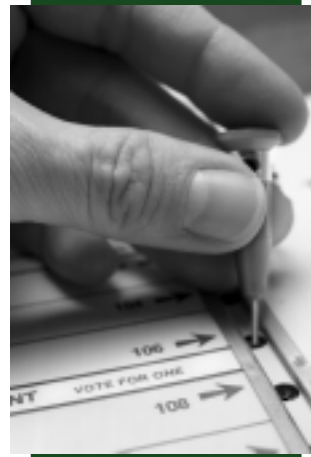
We would all like to see sex offenders removed from society so that our loved ones are not at risk. As a parent there is nothing more important to me than the safety of all of our children. The House passed three bills dealing with sex offenders in public schools and one bill regarding very serious sex predators. All these bills in their final form made a lot of sense and I voted for them.

The school bills tighten up the system of doing background checks on prospective teachers, coaches, and other school employees to make sure offenders aren't slipping through the cracks. We require more open reference checks, allow parents to appeal investigations to the superintendent of public instruction, and make it clear that teachers have a duty to report peers they see abusing children.

We tightened sentencing alternatives and lengthened sentences for the worst offenders. I think what we passed will actually convict more offenders and protect more children.

A NEW PRIMARY FOR WASHINGTON

One of the final actions this session was the establishment of a new primary election system. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled our beloved "blanket" primary unconstitutional in February, which drove the Legislature to work quickly on putting a new primary in place. We passed the "top two" qualifying primary, in which voters can vote for any candidate, in any race on the primary ballot regardless of political party, with a backup system in case of lawsuits.



The governor vetoed the "top two" sections of the bill, leaving the backup primary in which we each have to choose a party ballot at the primary, but our choice remains private. As we go to press there is significant uncertainty about what will happen.

Town Hall
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